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ABSTRACT

Jeffrey Wilhelm extrapolated 10 different dimensions of response to reading, which he grouped under the headings of "evocative," "connective," and "reflective" dimensions. A study used these dimensions of response to measure some of the activities set by a group of teachers and some of the written and oral work produced by the students against them. All the teachers in the research project were trained at universities whose English departments saw literature in New Critical or "Leavisite" terms. They took on board during professional development sessions the personal growth model of the reader-response theorists, and all are now struggling to incorporate critical theory ideas built into their teaching as well. During regular bi-monthly meetings (which were taped) of the "project circle," the teachers discussed literature teaching in general and their experiences in particular. The researcher followed four of the five teachers into their classrooms to observe how they and their students made meaning of an adolescent fiction text, and teachers and students were interviewed. Excerpts from teacher interviews suggest some initial insights. (NKA)

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Reading adolescent fiction; students 'reading' themselves

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The concept of students 'reading themselves' came from Terry Eagleton's interpretation of Wolfgang Iser's 'reception theory'. According to Eagleton, Iser sees the point of reading as that it brings us to 'deeper self-consciousness, catalyzes a more critical view of our identities' via the way we unpack codes and expectations set up in the reading (Eagleton 1983: 79), ie, reading helps us to understand ourselves better. 'It is as though what we have been "reading" in working our way through a book, is ourselves' (p79).

As Eagleton points out, Iser's reception theory is based on a liberal humanist ideology: 'a belief that in reading we should be flexible and open-minded, prepared to put our beliefs into question and allow them to be transformed' (p79). This sounds good, until we realise, or have Eagleton point out for us, that in order to be open to such transformation, a good reader would already have to be a liberal; 'so the act of reading produces a kind of human subject which it also presupposes' (p80). And what you get out of a text is determined by what you put in. Which, Eagleton feels, makes for a somewhat circular argument (Eagleton 1983:80).

Eagleton's condemnation notwithstanding (he called it a 'vicious circle'), the idea of readers 'reading' themselves may be a useful one in examining reader-response theory, which underpins the pedagogy of teaching the literary text in most Australian curriculum documents and professional development courses today. Which does not mean to say that reader-response theory underpins most of the actual teaching and that there are no teachers left who prefer the transmission method of teaching encouraged by those who view literature learning through the New Critical or Leavisite spectacles; after all that was they way they themselves learned the subject when at university.

Many teachers may not even realise that there are alternative theories of reading, and the research reported by Arthur Applebee in the US, in 1993, may well reflect the Australian condition. Applebee discovered that 72% of teachers reported little familiarity with developments in literary theory, and many considered it as far removed from the coalface at which they were working (Wilhelm 1997). These figures are cited Michael Smith's foreword to Jeff Wilhelm's *You Gotta BE the Book* (Wilhelm 1997), which I shall refer to again later as one that influenced my own thinking about my research. Wilhelm said

> I didn't even know that New Criticism was a theory; I thought it was just the stance and strategies you used to read well. I had digested it, unaware that it was just one theory of reading among a constellation of theories. (Wilhelm 1997:14)

Reader-response theorists have built on Louise Rosenblatt's transactional model, first proposed in the 1930s, but becoming more fashionable in academic circles in the 1970s and filtering from there into schools, and her position is for me best described in *The Reader the Text the Poem: Transactional Theory of the Literary* of 1978.

Rosenblatt's theory holds that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text, and that meaning does not reside in the squiggles on the page, but inside the reader's head as s/he relates what has been decoded to his or her own experiences, understandings, life (Rosenblatt 1978). In that way it can be said that what a reader reads is him/herself. Therefore Leavisite/ New Critical teachers are no longer needed to explain the code - all readers can make meaning for themselves, and every reader's interpretation of a text will be unique.

And therein lurks a problem. Some theorists have taken this to the confusing extreme of claiming that this means that there are as many valid readings as there are readers: as teachers we would have had to acknowledge any readings our students choose to come up with as worthy of respect (and a pass mark!) For if all readers' responses were now valued, and there proved to be no ultimate 'meaning' or 'truth' in a text, how was one to teach literature?

The answer might be to allow the students take to charge of their own learning, as Gordon Pradl (1996) suggests in his book *Literature for Democracy: Reading as a Social Act*. In Chapter 2, 'Surviving in the Hall of Mirrors' he describes his past in high school teaching, explores the sources of his authority and questions how he can remain committed and cheerful if he gives up the 'authority' of definite 'truths' handed to him by his university lecturers, and has to learn to live with ambiguity.

In the section 'Keeping the text in mind' (p109) for example, he describes his struggle to break with traditional patterns of control in the classroom, because statements from students in response to a literary text they were studying 'seem to come from a world not my own' (p109), and seemed to him to be judgmental and not defensible.

Pradl used Rosenblatt's transactional theory extensively to reorganise his own critical thinking and pedagogy, and he shares with her the commitment that the literature classroom should foster democracy.

Peter Rabinowitz and Michael Smith, in *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the teaching of literature,*(Rabinowitz & Smith 1998) also tackle this problem of "unique and individual but-how-valid-is-it" meaning making. Their solution, put very simplistically, is to lead the student back to the author, and value those responses that can be justified with reference to the text. They postulate that what they call 'authorial reading' is not only compatible with, but even essential to, progressive teaching and truly engaged readers. While admitting their debt to Rosenblatt's transactional theory, Rabinowitz and Smith feel that she did not fully allow for the author's role in the meaning-making process. They do not wish to put authors back on pedestals and resuscitate the "great man of literature" idea, but they assert that there are techniques and codes of writing which are recognised as having particular functions, and that students, instead of being cast adrift to find their own meanings, can and should be taught these conventions, in order to recognise their particular functions.

Neither Pradl nor Rabinowitz and Smith specifically mention making use of another aspect of Rosenblatt's transactional theory: the difference between what she calls efferent reading, which is basically reading for information, and the kind of reading that occurs when an adolescent fiction novel is read: aesthetic reading. It is the ability to read aesthetically that allows the reader to 'live the experience' of the text, and Rosenblatt insists on separating the 'evocation' of the text from any response to it, although both are aspects of the 'transaction' involved in aesthetic reading. (Rosenblatt 1978)

Jeff Wilhelm (1997) recognised much in Rosenblatt's work, and, like Pradl, used her 'transaction' theory to explain what had been puzzling him about both his reluctant and many of his better readers: they did not know how to take an 'aesthetic' stance as they read. Those students regarded reading as the finding of information in the text or as the passive reception of another's meaning. Many of the better readers too, did not experience literature in a way he considered to be 'complete'.

> They did not recognise or make use of conventional invitations to make certain sorts of meaning... They missed irony, didn't understand unreliable narrators, didn't fill in textual gaps, didn't seem to converse with or critique characters, authors, or other readers. Their interpretations of a text's meaning often seemed very far off the mark. (Wilhelm 1997:22)

He could not find in Rosenblatt's or other theorists' work any answers about how to help such students. So he decided to study three of his best readers to find out what readers do to achieve an aesthetic reading, and then in *You Gotta BE the book,* he wrote up the case studies.

His case study students often confirmed what he had learned from literary theorists. For example, the transactional view, focussing as it does on the experience of reading, makes the traditional idea of a literary 'canon' problematical, as any text that provides a particular reader with a deeply engaging aesthetic experience is deemed to be a literary text. Wilhelm's case study students said that a good book should be judged by 'the amount of time people read and how deep they get into it' or by 'what is learned, how it effected (sic) or changed them' (p31). This kind of engagement depends on the reader's context, and that implies a new role for teachers:

> One important goal will be to teach students how to find and select the sort of materials throughout their lives that will speak to their current needs, desires or concerns (p33).

And if this goal is to be achieved, teachers have to read a lot of children's literature, and secondary English teachers will be required to read much more adolescent fiction than seems, on anecdotal evidence, to be the case now, where teachers admit to not reading much more than to be able to select a suitable class novel, and relying on the increasingly non-existent librarian to point students in the right direction for wider reading.

As one of Wilhelm's case study students said, the best thing a teacher could do would be to recommend a good story and give her the chance to talk about it. But

> Most teachers must not read, or they'd know how to teach reading and not ruin it for us (p33).

In his escape from New Criticism and his entry into the related paradigms of reader response and critical literacy, Wilhelm learned to cope with his students' demands to read authors such as Stephen King and R. L. Stine and romantic 'trash' literature. He found that 'these formulaic books speak to the students and are helping them discover the power of reading, and that they often lead to the reading of other material' (p36), a finding often repeated by school librarians in Australia, especially when they are asked to defend their decision to include such books in the school collection.

When Wilhelm restructured his classroom to enable the sharing of literature through drama and visual art activities, he realised that the students were now able to see how others in their group read differently, and had different understandings of the same words, scenes and stories. This also provided him with his title. In an exchange between two reading partners one said

> I can't believe you do all that stuff when you read! Holy crap, I'm not doing... like nothing... compared to you!
>
> (His case study mate replied:)
>
> I can't believe you don't do something. If you don't, you're not reading, man... It's gotta be like wrestling, or watching a movie or playing a video game... You've got to... like... *be* there (p49).

In his journal, Wilhelm recorded that

> (t)here's a sort of meta-cognitive awareness happening here that I've never seen before. Their reading is being used as an exploration and extrapolation of selves and possibilities... as individuals and as members of a group (p45).

These students were 'reading themselves'.

Wilhelm extrapolated from his new insight ten different dimensions of response, which he grouped under the headings of *evocative, connective* and *reflective* dimensions. One of his key findings came

under the connective response heading: 'the data suggested that *without the bringing in of personally lived experience to literature, the reverse operation, bringing literature back to life, did not occur'* (p 70). In other words, the student who does not read aesthetically, evoking the text as s/he reads, but only reads efferently, for information, cannot '[bring] literature to life', cannot enjoy it.

I intend to use these dimensions of response to measure some of the activities set by the teachers in my study, and some of the written and oral work produced by the students against them.

Wilhelm is part of the same academic community, I believe, as Rabinowitz and Smith, and at the time of his research, he was aware of their work on authorial reading.

The author's intentions, of course, are foregrounded again in the reading theory that chronologically follows reader-response, and which is slowly gaining ground in Australian schools: that of 'critical theory' or 'contextual criticism', which uses much of what post-structuralists have to say about the state of the world. Post-structuralists say that the reader is constructed by the text, that is, that readers are positioned both by society and by the discourse of the text to respond in particular ways. Critical theory aims to foreground the ways that texts work, it concentrates on *context*, so that readers engage with texts but can also learn to detach themselves from the experience.

> Contextual Criticism offers the student of literature a new range of tools that offer insight into texts already read from different theoretical perspectives. In a sense it is a mirror in which we see ourselves and our culture perhaps more clearly and more critically than we would otherwise be able to. The post structuralist lays our culture open to us by making it, for an instant, foreign to us. (Gravina 1994:23)

All the teachers I worked with for my research were trained at universities whose English departments saw literature in Leavisite terms, who took on board, during professional development sessions, the personal growth model of the reader-response theorists, and all are now struggling to incorporate critical theory ideas into their teaching as well.

During 1997, the year in which I collected my data, six teachers and myself formed the 'project circle'. During our regular bi-monthly meetings, which I taped, we discussed literature teaching in general and their experiences in particular - amongst many and varied other topics that English teachers raise when they are talking shop! The idea for this I found in my reading of Dennis Sumara's *Private Readings in Public: Schooling the Literary Imagination* (1996) . Like me, one of the things Sumara set out to do in his research was find out what kind of meaning-making was going on in the (in his case, Canadian) secondary classrooms when teachers and students grappled with contemporary fiction, and one of his sources of data was the conversations he and his group of teachers had about teaching contemporary literature in general, and specific texts in their specific classrooms in particular.

I was able to follow four of the teachers into their classrooms for five to eight weeks each , to observe how they and their students made meaning of an adolescent fiction text. Before they taught the book, I interviewed each of these teachers separately to ask about their thoughts and plans for this unit of work, and I also interviewed as many of their students as I could, to ask their opinions of reading in general, of having to read a class novel, and of the novel they'd just studied in particular. These interviews were also taped and eventually transcribed. If I have learned an early lesson from doing this kind of research it is to get a better quality tape recorder, and not underestimate the amount of time it takes to transcribe taped interviews - especially open-ended ones.

I'd like to share with you some of the initial insights I have gained from one of those early interviews with teachers:

Cathy has taught *Dougy (*1993) by James Moloney, for several years, and in her early interview with me she described how she taught it previously. She did not plan major changes for the year 11 class I was to observe later.

The novel *Dougy* is set in a small Australia bush town, somewhere in Queensland, and the narrator is an

Aboriginal boy who describes what happens to his family and his town during the year he turned thirteen. His sister Gracey is picked for the state athletics championships, and this triggers dramatic events for the town, where some of the white people have been muttering about preferential treatment for Aborigines. A flood brings the crisis to a head, and allows Moloney to interweave at least one Aboriginal Dreamtime story into the action.

Cathy planned to spend four weeks on the unit - depending on interruptions - and was keen to use the response journal as a student activity. She planned for one of the summative tasks to be

> **CT:** a more detailed version of their reading journal which I think is a valid form of assessing their response to their reading and their thinking about the book...(interview 24/10/1996)

She generally starts off studying all novels by having the students look at the paratext of the front cover and the blurb and making predictions about the storyline. She sees that as fairly common practice, and an interest-raising activity for students who then come back to these predictions later. Student comments are recorded in their journals, and then she always reads the first chapter aloud to the class, and starts discussion. Students again record some of their own initial impressions of the characters and the setting in their journals.

> **CT:** And then we basically proceed through the book with them reading in class, by themselves, making journal responses, reading for homework. Every couple of lessons we would have a class discussion or a plenary discussion which I would lead, and ask them a few questions just to see how they were going, and whether they were picking up the story line. Just discussing any relevant issues and so on, and in particular drawing attention to the racism that's apparent through the way the characters are treated... (interview 24/10/96)

She gives the students a set of questions to answer at a half-way point because she thinks

> **CT:** it's important... that they refocus some of their ideas on character development, setting and so on, plot and predictions, style, mood, just so they are thinking of these sorts of terms all the way through. (interview 24/10/96)

At the end of the book she sets the parameters for a final journal entry, in the form of formal questions. She wants to see

> **CT:** if they have formed any definite attitudes about what they've read, and attitudes about the topic of racism, sympathy with the characters or whatever, and certainly their understanding of the story and also the underlying themes and issues. (interview 24/10/96)

She expects a fairly detailed response of about 250 - 300 words, about a page in length.

Cathy intervenes in the journal writing in this way to provide a kind of scaffold, while individual chapter responses are left to the students and are meant to be personal responses, not chapter summaries.

Soon after they have started reading the novel, students are also asked to create what Cathy calls

> **CT:** a literary map... of the setting of the book, so they can picture in their minds, as well as on the page, where things are and where events happen, and who lives where. And I think it points out the segregation aspects of the living conditions of the aboriginal people, who live in the same street as the police, the teachers and the other aboriginal people. (interview 24/10/96)

She asks the students if any have ever lived in a small country town, and invites them to bring their knowledge of how a small town works to this map. Students are sent back to the text to decide on the details needed for the map.

> **CT:** And that's why I get them to do that, so they look at close textual detail and also see how the setting influences the events in the book. (interview 24/10/96)

She also sets the creating of an alternative cover to the book as a task, and she links these visual responses with an oral presentation, in which students have to explain their choices for this cover to a small group of their peers. This task is assessed by these peers, according to a list of oral presentation criteria she has worked out for them.

Cathy says that she tends to steer away from what she called, but did not describe, 'the formal essay' as a response to this book. Instead, she asks for a comparison with a film, *The Fringe Dwellers* which covers similar ground, some of it in a humorous way. To stop the students laughing *at* the Aboriginal characters rather than *with* them, she provides some review guidelines. She asks them to draw up a plan for a comparative essay in the form of a Venn diagram, and students are then asked to write the essay.

In the past she has also asked for a visual response in the form of a poster, because that tied in with the theme of *The International Year of Tolerance*. That would not be relevant this time round, but she did plan to alert them to things that are currently happening. She knew she could count on Australian Aboriginal sprinter and world champion 400 metre runner Cathy Freeman being in the news, and she keeps all the articles she can find in the press about Aboriginal sports people in a newspaper file, or displays them around the classroom. She also collects information about the author and reviews about the book, to share with the students.

I observed Cathy teach this unit of work, and she followed the plan she outlined to me that day very closely. In subsequent conversations with her, and from the classroom observations, I learned that Cathy uses the novel mainly to teach about racism, because she feels that her students need to know what it looks like in Australia, that it is out there. She also wants to teach acceptance of Aboriginal people. Her pedagogical methods seem on first analysis to be those of the reader-response paradigm, in that she wants her students to find their own meanings in the text, but she guides them along the way quite firmly with set questions for some of the journal entries, and with the kinds of activities she sets. Cathy wants her students to denounce racism, and feel sympathy for the (mainly Aboriginal) characters.

Her students were well aware of her reasons for selecting that particular text: of the 14 students I was able to revisit several months after I had observed in their classroom, 11 mentioned learning about racism.

Eagleton would probably say these students were already liberal humanists in that they were open to the transformation described by Iser as being the point of reading. That is, they were open to regarding racism as evil, considered by Cathy as being the point of reading this particular book. The one young man who thought she selected the novel because 'otherwise nobody would read (it)' was probably not a liberal humanist, and was (therefore?) not transformed. He was the most resistant reader in the class - not resisting the ideology of the book, just resisting any reading of any books at all.

A number of students also mentioned that the reason Cathy selected *Dougy* for them to study was because it dealt with Aboriginal people and customs and also because the book was set in Australia and the characters were close to them in age. By mentioning the latter, they confounded those critics whom Cathy mentioned in her interview, who felt that *Dougy* is too young a book for year 11 because the narrator is only 13, and hasn't made it to high school yet. I hope to find out from analysing their work whether Cathy' students identified more with the other main characters whom Dougy, as narrator, describes, and who are all older than he.

I see Cathy as a 'scaffolder', and 'scaffolding' is a term she uses herself of the way she sets out the activities for her students. The kinds of activities she devises seem to belong in the reader-response paradigm: the journal, the drawings, the alternative cover for the novel, the small group peer interviews in which students explain their literary maps to each other. She sees her compulsory questions as a way to 'scaffold' the journal entries, and the Venn [or its alternative, the three columns] diagram as a way to 'scaffold' the comparative essay. The essay topic, however, comparing the treatment of Aborigines in the novel and the movie, is one that sits more comfortably in the textual criticism paradigm, for all that Cathy tries to avoid 'traditional essays.'. In the following year, those students who elect to do English [it is not compulsory in year 12 in South Australia] will have to write essays, so teaching how to write them

is part of her brief. Cathy is protective of her students, and aims to help them succeed.

As a scaffolder, Cathy tries to remain in control of the meaning-making process as a construct she and the students are building in the classroom together. It will be interesting to analyse and compare the various and probably different constructions her students produced after a single reading of the novel, with that of Cathy, who has read the novel several times, and reads selected sections of it aloud to her students every year. If the drawings of the Moodagadda, the Aboriginal Dreamtime water creature that plays such a role in Dougy's imagination, are anything to go by, no two students' responses are alike. That may have something to do with their varying artistic capabilities, but also with the schema with which they operate to make meaning.

As you can see, I am at the beginning of the theory building that will grow out of the data analysis. Collecting the data has been great fun, and working with it is extremely interesting, even though I have now come to the stage where I have to do some very serious thinking. I hope in future conferences to share some more stories from the classrooms of South Australia, and to have a deeper understanding of the meaning making process that goes on in them.

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